

THE RESURRECTION AND MISSOURIANS
Matthew 20:19-31 NEB
April 22, 1979

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It seems to me that the resurrection of Jesus is the sermon subject called for not only on Easter Day but also on the Sunday after Easter. That is the way the Gospel according to John tells the story, after all. Among the followers of Jesus there was one man, who when told that Jesus was risen, said, in effect, "I'm from Missouri; you'll have to show me." Listen now to his story in the 20th chapter of John. It begins on the evening of the first Easter.

"Late that Sunday evening, when the disciples were together behind locked doors, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them. 'Peace be with you' he said, and then showed them his hands and his side. So when the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus repeated, 'Peace be with you', and said, 'As the Father sent me, so I send you.' Then he breathed on them, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive any man's sins, they stand forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.'

"One of the Twelve, Thomas, that is 'the Twin', was not with the rest when Jesus came. So the disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' He said, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will not believe it.'

"A week later his disciples were again in the room, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them, saying, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Reach your finger here; see my hands. Reach your hand here and put it into my side. Be unbelieving no longer, but believe.' Thomas said, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said, 'Because you have seen me you have found faith. Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith.'

"There were indeed many other signs that Jesus performed in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. Those here written have been recorded in order that you may hold the faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may possess life by his name."

The first thing to be said about the story of Thomas is this: The author of the Gospel according to John held this story to be of utmost importance. These verses constitute the end of John's account as it was originally written. He chose this to be the climax of his story.

John tells us that all the disciples had given up. Jesus had been executed on a cross and then buried in a tomb three days before. The disciples were completely disillusioned. Their leader was dead. They were defeated, beaten men. They had surrendered all hope, locked themselves behind barred doors in fear and trembling. There was no future for them. And then the resurrection happened! Shockingly, Jesus was with them again! Not because of anything they had done -- they had given up -- but entirely because of God's power, Jesus was right there with them again!

I emphasize the disciples' mood of complete despair for a reason. That is, no matter how each person of us may think about the resurrection of Jesus, no matter how we may try to understand what happened, to explain it or intellectualize it or even rationalize it, still the fact remains that the resurrection was a direct, forceful, completely real experience for the disciples. They were not expecting it; far from it. It was certainly not something they could have schemed

and invented, for the fact is they were completely caught by surprise. They were bowled over to find Jesus with them again.

Today's scripture emphasizes that truth. Thomas was not with them on Easter evening and when they all told him about it, in all their excitement, he pooh-poohed them. We can imagine how Thomas must have reacted: "You guys are higher than a kite. You've either had too much of the grape or you're suffering from some mass hysteria. You'd better come down to earth and face facts: It's all over. Don't pull my leg any more." A good honest reply from a man whose hopes were dead. And then, seven days later, it happened again and this time Thomas was there. It happened to him so powerfully that, on seeing Jesus, Thomas could only blurt out, "My Lord and my God." His experience of the Risen Lord could not be denied by the man who had to be shown first. Even for Doubting Thomas it happened so powerfully that he was bowled over.

As is true of so much of the Bible, this story has passed into our common language. "Doubting Thomas" is a common term of scorn. It points a finger at a person who bull-headedly refuses to accept what is considered an established truth. He always has the chip of disbelief teetering on his shoulder. Society would run smoother without Doubting Thomases, we think. Life would be more agreeable without stubborn Missourians who demand to be shown.

The truth is that we all have something of Doubting Thomas in us. And maybe we aren't too happy about that. We have been told to have faith, just believe. Asking pushy questions about religion, raising doubts and objections -- we've been taught that is the opposite of having faith. Is it? Let's take another look at the original Doubting Thomas.

In the same Gospel according to John, in chapter 11, there is an earlier episode concerning this same Thomas: Jesus has just received news that his friend Lazarus became sick and died and so he plans to journey to Judea in order to bring Lazarus back to life, raise him from his grave. The Gospel record tells us that the last time Jesus was in Judea he had barely escaped violent death by stoning. The story goes like this: After receiving word about Lazarus, Jesus "said to his disciples, 'Let us go back to Judea.' 'Rabbi,' his disciples said, 'it is not long since the Jews there were wanting to stone you. Are you going there again?'...But Thomas, called 'the twin', said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'"

Quite a different picture. Here Thomas is described as the most faithful, as ready to be the first to sacrifice his life. And then, ten days or so later, Thomas is portrayed again, in today's scripture lesson, and this time he is the last to believe, the skeptic, the doubter: I will not believe unless I see, touch, feel.

Both pictures are of the same man. A man of faith and yet of penetrating doubts. Was he at one point wholly believing and then ten days later wholly disbelieving? Of course not. Thomas was human, and being human, he had both elements in his make-up. He believed and yet had many questions. He doubted and yet had faith. He badly wanted to find a deep meaning in life and yet held back in spite of his friends' arguments for fear of committing himself to something without reality, to what might turn out to be delusion, merely maudlin sentimentality.

Above all, Thomas was a very honest person -- honest about his feelings even under the pressure of his friends. He honestly doubted what the others had seen at their meeting and he said so. At least he had not had any such experience. It was something he desperately wanted to believe. It would put meaning into everything that had happened to him. But wanting to believe was not enough for Thomas.

We are in Thomas' position, aren't we? We want to believe. We want a faith which makes everything meaningful, faith which completely overcomes difficulties and sorrows, a faith which transforms every aspect of our lives from emptiness into a deep rich fullness. So, we profess faith and all along, like Thomas, we have reservations.

We have a hard time being honest about our ambivalence, our questioning, our doubting. We often mouth convictions we're not sure of. We pretend to ourselves and others that our faith is greater and more unshakeable than it really is. Especially in church groups, especially here where we meet with others in precisely the same boat, we hesitate to disclose our lack of complete understanding, our lack of complete unshakeable faith. We hide our hard questions about faith from each other in order to be nice and agreeable, and soon we cannot find them for ourselves. We duck behind the false facade of positive thinking. And in doing so, we nicely insulate ourselves from growing and maturing in true faith.

Check out that story of Doubting Thomas again. It is no accident that it was the last incident in John's original account. In Thomas, John was describing the climax of the drama of faith. This is the way people everywhere, in all ages, must react to the Good News, John was saying. This is what resurrection must mean in the lives of individuals -- people exposing their whole selves, their honest beliefs and their honest doubts to the power which can then revolutionize their lives.

In 1350 Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote a long poem titled "In Memoriam". He tells about a man with doubts, a man who knew he had reservations about faith, but who was honest in dealing with them: "...You tell me, doubt is Devil-born. I know not: one indeed I knew In many a subtle question versed, Who touched a jarring harp at first, But ever strove to make it true; Perplexed in faith, but pure in deeds, At last he beat his music out. There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds. He fought his doubts and gather'd strength, He would not make his judgment blind, He faced the spectres of the mind And laid them: Thus he came at length to find a stronger faith..."

But what if it is not just a matter of doubt and questions, not just a problem of intellect and reasoning that keeps us separated from the resurrection? What if it goes much deeper than that? reaches into our attitudes, our failures and inadequacies?

It was the same for the disciples when they got together behind locked doors. They had failed Jesus miserably. They had slept in the garden while the soldiers closed in to arrest Jesus. Then they had run in all directions like frightened rabbits to save their lives. Peter three times denied knowing Jesus, but all the others had already fled, were not even there for the trial and execution. They knew they were deserters, rats who had scurried from a sinking ship. Not a shred of self-respect left for them.

Can you imagine trusting the most important act of God ever to this crowd of deserters and cowards? That is what happened. The Risen Christ burst into their dismal, locked room, into their raw, guilty consciences, into their despair and defeat. And his shocking presence not only said all their doubts about him were wrong, it said so much more. His appearance to them meant he forgave them and trusted them. However poorly they had performed in the past, he was now trusting them, sending them to carry out his work. He restored them by having confidence in them.

When I was sixteen, I had a car accident because I was careless for a moment. No one was injured much, but the car was badly wrecked. While it was being repaired, our family was without a car for several weeks. I was completely ashamed and conscience-stricken. It so happened that about a week after the accident I was in another car with a group of young people on the way to a youth retreat. We had gone only a few miles when the man who was driving us suddenly pulled the car to the side of the road and said to me, "Gerry, you drive the rest of the way." I was flabbergasted! He knew the whole story and yet he trusted me with his car and with his life and the others when only a few days before I had failed disastrously. I felt completely restored by his confidence in me.

Raise that to the nth power and that must have been what the disciples experienced when Jesus appeared and sent them to represent him to the world. Doubters and cowards and failures, they were. Yet to them came the resurrection and with it Christ's forgiveness and trust. And power. They were lifted above themselves, above their weaknesses, and formed into the first Christian Church, daring, courageous, unstoppable.

John chooses to make this story the climax of his Gospel because he wants us to read it and see ourselves in it. He is saying to those who have doubts and questions and work with them honestly, to those who fail as disciples at times but who long to lead lives fully directed by Christ's love, to such people in this day comes the transforming power of the Resurrection.

Our heavenly Father, we offer our deepest thanks for the new life you give us through the resurrection of Jesus. Receiving your power, may we be reborn into lives of openness and love and justify his confidence that we will carry out his work.

Amen.